Multiple Literacies

Improving our support for Aboriginal literacy in the NWT

NWT Literacy Council
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PART I INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

1.0 Introduction

The NWT Literacy Council has supported literacy development in all official languages since 1989. Most of our work focuses on English literacy, but we have also supported Aboriginal literacy directly. We know that people in the Aboriginal language communities believe it is important and urgent to maintain, revitalize and promote Aboriginal languages and literacy, and so we feel it is time for us as a literacy organization to try to improve our support in this area.

1.1 The NWT Literacy Council

We are a non-government organization that serves the whole NWT, promoting and supporting literacy development in all NWT official languages. We do this through research, resource development, training, information sharing, and public awareness. Here are some of the current services we provide to people who work in literacy.

- We have conducted research on literacy in the NWT, *Making a Case for Literacy,* and *Languages of the Land: A Resource Manual for Aboriginal Language Activists.* These provide information on different aspects of literacy.
- We have developed new program resources, including *1- 2-3 Rhyme with Me*; *Books in the Home*; *Families First: A Northern Parenting and Literacy Program*; *Tools for Community Building*; *Health Check: A Health and Literacy Program.* We are now developing a literacy activity manual.
- We develop and deliver training workshops on community and family literacy, tutor training, teaching approaches and curriculum support, plain language writing, program planning, proposal writing and evaluation.
- We have a resource lending library and web site to help people access resources.
- We have a literacy folder on North of 60, that links to an electronic literacy conference site in southern Canada.
- We publish regular newsletters that we send to people across the NWT.

- We promote literacy in all official languages through the NWT Writing Contest, NWT Literacy Week and the PGI Golf Tournament for Literacy. We encourage people to celebrate Family Literacy Day and Aboriginal Languages Week.
- We monitor and respond to literacy policy in Canada and the NWT.

We work directly with a variety of groups and individuals: people who work in literacy programs, learners, teachers, librarians, early childhood staff and other community resource people. We also work with Aurora College, the GNWT, not-for-profit organizations, family support programs, early childhood programs, libraries, schools, Divisional Education Councils and District Education Authorities, Aboriginal organizations and other agencies. Our literacy work helps people take more control of their lives. It also lets them take part in the social, institutional and economic life of the north.

Since 1989, we have supported Aboriginal literacy directly by:

- Working with Aboriginal people to plan and deliver Aboriginal language writing workshops.
- Publishing books in Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, Chipewyan, South Slavey, Dogrib and Bush Cree.
- Including Aboriginal language books, where possible, as part of book bags for children.
- Promoting Aboriginal languages in print, on radio and on TV.
- Encouraging stories in Aboriginal languages as part of the NWT Writing Contest.
- Publishing *Languages of the Land: A Resource Manual for Aboriginal Language Activists,* which several language communities used when they developed their multi-year plans.
- Encouraging community family literacy projects in Aboriginal languages.

1.2 The project

In the last few years a number of things related to literacy have changed:

- The Literacy Council has grown and expanded our services, especially in family literacy and resource development.
- Today, the public is more aware of how important literacy is.
- There is a feeling of urgency around efforts to preserve Aboriginal languages.
- The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) has handed over the responsibility and accompanying resources for Aboriginal language development to the different language communities.
- Each language community has developed a multi-year plan to revitalize its language.
- The GNWT has recently released several strategies that include literacy and Aboriginal languages. These list the NWT Literacy Council as a partner in a number of initiatives.
- The GNWT has set up a Special Committee to Review the *Official Languages Act.* The committee is asking people what changes are needed to make sure the *Act* meets the needs of people in the NWT.

To help us adapt to these changes and provide better support to Aboriginal languages, we decided it was time to examine our role in Aboriginal literacy. We began by doing some background research so that we were familiar with the issues. We looked at the importance of language in people's lives, and at the current health of Aboriginal languages in Canada and the NWT. We then identified some issues around literacy, in particular around Aboriginal literacy. We also looked at efforts to support Aboriginal languages and literacy: strategies other literacy coalitions have adopted, funding for language activities, strategies the GNWT has, as well as the Aboriginal language communities' own plans for their languages.

The final part of the project was to consult with the Aboriginal language communities. We went to six of the eight regions and interviewed language coordinators and people from language and cultural organizations. They talked about what Aboriginal literacy means to them. They shared with us resources or projects they were working on. They helped us identify areas where we have a common interest. They talked about the challenges they face in their work every day. And

finally, they suggested ways in which the Literacy Council might be able to work with them to support Aboriginal literacy.

This report is the result of our research and discussions. It is a first step in building partnerships with Aboriginal language communities. While much of what you will read is not new, we have some clearer direction about what our role might be, and some things to think about as we redefine that role to improve our support for Aboriginal literacy. There are some concrete things we can continue with, or can begin to do, immediately. The framework for change, however, is more long-term. It requires more reflection, more fundamental change and more in-depth discussion within our organization.

PART II BACKGROUND RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

2.0 Language in People's Lives

Canada is rich in languages, with its two official languages, its many immigrant languages and fifty Aboriginal languages. Today, perhaps more than in the past, society recognizes the relationship between language, culture and identity. And at least in some measure, it tries to reflect that relationship through laws that respect people's language rights and through activities like Aboriginal and heritage language courses.

2.1 The importance of language

Our language is immensely important to us, because it symbolizes, in a very concrete way, the cultural group we belong to. Language embodies culture: we use it to define our world and make sense of it. It shapes the way we look at the world, giving us our worldview. We use language to transmit our culture and worldview from one generation to the next. Joshua Fishman, who has studied languages, claims 'A language long associated with the culture is best able to express most easily, most exactly, most richly, with more appropriate overtones, the concerns, artefacts, values,

and interests of that culture.'[1] Languages are important in maintaining our collective identity, culture, and values and beliefs, but they are also an important part of an individual's identity and his or her feeling of self-worth.

For a language to survive, it needs to pass from generation to generation. Generally this happens in the home and community, where family members learn the language from birth and use it as part of their everyday lives.

2.2 Aboriginal languages in Canada

Aboriginal peoples identify strongly with their cultural heritage and their languages. Their languages express their relationship with their environment, their social traditions and their spirituality, and establish continuity with their past.

> *What type of people we are, where we came from, what land we claim, and all our legends are based on the language we speak.*
>
> Mary Seimens, Dogrib Language Specialist[2]

Their languages also reflect a holistic approach to life, where everything is connected—where everything interacts with everything else.

> *Language is an essential part of the holistic approach to life that characterizes Aboriginal cultures…*
>
> Ruth Norton and Mark Fettes, *Taking Back the Talk*[3]

[1] Fishman, Joshua. 'What do you lose when you lose your language? In G. Cantoni, ed. *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages.* Flagstaff, Centre for Excellence in Education, Northern Arizona University, 1996.
[2] Crosscurrent Associates, *Languages of the Land: A resource manual for Aboriginal language activists*. Yellowknife: NWT Literacy Council, 1999.
[3] Norton, Ruth and Mark Fettes. *Taking Back the Talk: A Specialized Review on Aboriginal Languages and Literacy*. Paper prepared as part of the research program of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. November 1994.

Canada has fifty Aboriginal languages, of varying sizes and strengths. In 1980 James Bauman introduced a rating scale to help people assess the state of their language. He described languages as flourishing, enduring, declining, obsolete or extinct[4]. During the past 100 years in Canada, nearly ten Aboriginal languages that were once flourishing have become extinct. Others are close to being extinct. In 1996, only three Aboriginal languages—Cree, Ojibwa and Inuktitut—had enough mother tongue speakers to be considered safe from extinction over the long-term[5].

In the 1996 census, only 26% of those who identified themselves as Aboriginal said their mother tongue was an Aboriginal language[6]. Fewer than that spoke an Aboriginal language at home[7]. The census figures also show that there are more older speakers than younger speakers, meaning that fewer young people have learned or understand the language.

Other minority languages in Canada, like Chinese or Ukrainian, have a homeland elsewhere in the world, but for many of our Aboriginal languages, including some in the NWT, Canada *is* the homeland. If these Aboriginal languages disappear, they will take with them unique ways of looking at the world.

> *When the Aboriginal languages are lost to Canada, they are lost to the world, and the knowledge they contain dies with them.*
>
> Assembly of First Nations[8]

Several different factors, including the presence of a strong dominant language like English, may contribute to the decline of languages.

[4]Crosscurrent Associates, *Languages of the Land: A resource manual for Aboriginal language activists*. Yellowknife: NWT Literacy Council, 1999.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Norris, Mary Jane. "Canada's Aboriginal Languages". *Canadian Social Trends*, Winter 1998 pp8-16.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Assembly of First Nations Education Secretariat. *An Information Handbook on Aboriginal Languages and Literacy*.

2.3 Aboriginal languages in the NWT

The NWT is home to Canada's second largest group of Aboriginal people[9]. In fact, almost half the people who live here are Aboriginal. Because of the make-up of our population, the *Official Languages Act of the Northwest Territories* recognizes six Aboriginal languages, as well as English and French, as official languages: Inuktitut[10](which includes Inuvialuktun and Inuinnaqtun), Gwich'in, North and South Slavey, Dogrib, Cree and Chipewyan.

The health of these languages varies widely, but most are 'declining'. The trends in language use here are similar to those in other places in Canada. Overall, less than half those who are Aboriginal speak an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. Fewer use an Aboriginal language in the home. And even fewer young people are learning an Aboriginal language[11]

Many people who speak an Aboriginal language are using English, rather than their own language, in their everyday lives. We can see this 'language shift' clearly if we compare the number of people whose mother tongue is an Aboriginal language with the number of people who use their Aboriginal language in the home. This gives us a 'change index' for each language.

Use of Aboriginal Languages in the Northwest Territories Change Index[12]

	Inuktitut[13]	Slavey	Dogrib	Chipewyan	Gwich'in	Cree
Mother Tongue	835	2075	2000	515	250	185
Home Language	160	1190	1355	210	40	30
Change index	-80.90%	-42.70%	-32.30%	-59.20%	-84.00%	-83.80%

[9] Government of the Northwest Territories Dept. of Education, Culture and Employment, *Revitalizing, Enhancing and Promoting Aboriginal Languages: Strategies for Supporting Aboriginal Languages.*
[10] Most Inuktitut speakers now live in Nunavut.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Government of the Northwest territories Dept. of Education, Culture and Employment, *Revitalizing, Enhancing and Promoting Aboriginal Languages: Strategies for Supporting Aboriginal Languages.*
[13] Includes Inuvialuktun and Inuinnaqtun

From the table, we can see a change in the use of all Aboriginal languages in the home. In some cases, like Inuktitut, Gwich'in and Cree, that change is dramatic.

When we compare mother tongue and home language use by age in the NWT (see Appendix A) we can see that:

- Where people say their mother tongue is an Aboriginal language, those between the ages of 20 and 60 use it the least in the home. These are the parents and grandparents who are usually responsible for transmitting the language to the children.
- Even for people over 60 years of age, English is replacing Aboriginal languages in the home in some language communities. For example, in 1996, only 26.1% of Gwich'in mother tongue speakers over 60 years of age said Gwich'in was their home language.

There are many possible reasons for the decline in the use of NWT Aboriginal languages[14]:

- English is the dominant language in Canada and the North.
- English is the dominant language of schooling and the workplace.
- Residential schooling interrupted the flow of the languages from one generation to another.
- Media, including TV and the Internet, are mainly in English.
- Many Aboriginal people have moved to a larger community, where they are more likely to hear English than their own Aboriginal language.
- Most fluent speakers of the language are older.

At a meeting of language coordinators in Yellowknife, in February 2002, in a plea for increased support from the GNWT, the language coordinator from the Gwich'in language community claimed that, without serious intervention, the Gwich'in language would be extinct in five years[15]. Other Aboriginal people in the NWT share similar concerns about the loss of their languages.

[14] Adapted from Government of the Northwest Territories Dept. of Education, Culture and Employment, *Revitalizing, Enhancing and Promoting Aboriginal Languages: Strategies for Supporting Aboriginal Languages.*
[15] Firth, William. In a report to the Government of the Northwest Territories' Language Coordinators' Meeting. Yellowknife, February 2002.

Loss of language is significant because of the importance of language in people's lives. But it is also significant when discussing literacy, because literacy models and practices flow from language and culture.

3.0 Language and Literacy

Literacy is a social practice, so to understand it, we need to understand the groups and institutions that socialize people into different literacy practices[16].

According to Trevor Cairney, who has researched different literacies[17], 'as a social practice literacy cannot be separated from the people who use it'. He goes on to say that this socio-cultural view of literacy suggests that 'teachers, students and parents construct their own models and definitions of literacy' according to the social and cultural groups they belong to. Cultural teachings and the communication patterns of different languages give rise to the particular understandings, norms, expectations, and roles that define what it means to be literate. In other words, different groups, including different cultures, socialize their members into literacy practices in different ways.

The kinds of literacy models and practices that we see people using in their homes vary from family to family, but tend to reflect the language and social practices of their culture. The purposes for which people use literacy, the ways families support children's literacy, attitudes towards literacy and the role that family members play in literacy development also vary, but again reflect their culture. So, for example, in a hunting culture, where visual literacy is important, we might expect people to be able to 'read' the sky to tell the weather, or to 'read' the land to find signs of animal tracks. In a home from a culture with an oral literacy tradition, we might expect to hear stories being told, and not to see many books. This means that a person may be highly literate in one situation, like on the land, but not in another. It also means that parents and teachers in the NWT may have different understandings of literacy.

[16] Cairney, Trevor. *Developing Partnerships: The home, school and community interface.*
[17] Cairney, Trevor. *Literacy and Diversity: Have our observations of difference made a difference?*

3.1 English literacy in the NWT

Similarly, institutions like schools also socialize people into particular models and practices of literacy. Literacy associated with schooling emphasizes reading and writing, and also specific ways of using language and interacting, like sitting quietly in a circle at story time, or being able to answer questions about a story. In Canada, school literacy is based on English and French literacy models. School literacy has become what Street calls 'the defining type' of literacy[18]: that is, we tend to measure people's literacy skills in terms of 'school literacy'.

In the Northwest Territories, using school literacy to define literacy, we see that, in 1999, overall:

- 13% of people had less than Grade 9 as their highest level of schooling[19].
- 19% of people did not have a high school diploma[20].

Again, using school literacy as the standard, Aboriginal people, who make up most of the population in many communities, have much lower levels of achievement than non-Aboriginal people[21]:

- 26% of Aboriginal adults have less than Grade 9 as their highest level of schooling.
- 55% of Aboriginal adults have less than a high school diploma as their highest level of education
- Only 2% of Aboriginal adults have a university degree

Being literate, as measured by school literacy, is important because it is one way in which people can take more control of their lives. It lets them take part in institutional learning and the economic life of the community. People with low literacy skills are more likely to:

- be poor—64% of people earning less than $10,000 a year have very low literacy skills.
- be in an accident, than their co-workers who can read well.

[18] Street, B.V. (1995) *Social Literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*. London: Longman.
[19] 1999 NWT Labour Force Survey
[20] Ibid.
[21] Government of the Northwest Territories, *Towards Literacy: A Strategy Framework 2001-2005.*

- be unemployed or on Income Support.
- have poor health, or even die earlier.

Such figures, however, reflect a one-dimensional, and often a deficit, view of literacy. They tend to undervalue and even marginalize other types of literacies, and simplify something that is very complex, such as the literacy situation facing Aboriginal peoples.

3.2 Aboriginal language literacy in the NWT

In Aboriginal languages, there is no equivalent word for 'literacy'. The Assembly of First Nations claims that literacy can refer to three things[22]:

- Literacy in a particular language
- Literacy as training in thought and knowledge in a particular field
- Literacy as the way a particular society uses written symbols

It claims that Aboriginal literacy needs to take into account these three factors: language, knowledge and social practice.

Taking Back the Talk, the review on Aboriginal language and literacy prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, suggests that there is universal agreement that Aboriginal peoples need to develop their own definitions of literacy, but no agreement on whether a single definition could apply to all Aboriginal people[23].

In the not-too-distant past, when Aboriginal people in the NWT lived on the land, they used their own languages. They communicated orally, often through stories. They also communicated visually, reading signs from their environment. Some Aboriginal languages used syllabics, which some elders learned and can still use today. Most languages had very little in the way of written material. Reading was not necessarily seen as a productive choice in an environment with oral and

[22] Assembly of first Nations. *Breaking the Chains: First Nations Literacy and Self-Determination.*Report of the Assembly of First Nations Language and Literacy Secretariat. March 1994.
[23] Norton, Ruth and Mark Fettes. *Taking Back the Talk: A Specialized Review on Aboriginal Languages and Literacy*. Paper prepared as part of the research program of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,. November 1994.

visual traditions, and in a hunting-gathering economy, where hard work was necessary for survival.

When the first residential schools opened in the NWT, children who attended them were forbidden to use their mother tongue and had to speak English instead. They also had to change their literacy practices. This meant when they returned home in the summer, they could no longer understand their parents, nor could their parents understand them. They also brought new literacy practices. This created a conflict and a discontinuity of language and literacy in their homes and communities. In some ways, this mismatch between home and school literacy, English and Aboriginal literacy, continues to the present day, and still impacts Aboriginal people.

In every culture, literacy models and practices vary from family to family and from group to group, giving rise to the concept of 'literacies'. Today, Aboriginal people in the NWT live in a complex world of multiple literacies. In this situation, Aboriginal literacy is probably better described as 'literacies' and depicted as a continuum. The purest form will occur where both the mother tongue and home language are an Aboriginal language, and the literacy practices use the Aboriginal language as the medium of communication. However, even in a home where English predominates, Aboriginal literacy practices will still exist. Even though people may not be able to speak their own language well, they are still likely to have been socialized at home at an early age into Aboriginal literacy through their cultural literacy models and practices.

To survive in today's world, yet retain their unique identity, Aboriginal people have to develop dual literacy skills—Aboriginal literacy skills that let them maintain their links with their ancestors, their environment and their spirituality, and English literacy skills that let them take part in institutional learning and the economy. People who have had to learn to live in bilingual, bi-literate situations understand how complex this is, and know the challenges involved in it. The Dogrib people aptly describe this as becoming 'strong like two people'.

3.3 Multiple literacy practices

In the Literacy Council, we see ourselves mainly as facilitators, trying to help communities get the skills they need to do things for themselves. We have spent the past five years working with community people, helping them build their capacity to plan and deliver literacy programs, especially family literacy programs…but in doing that here in the NWT, we face a dilemma. We find ourselves reflecting on our practices, wondering if the interventions we are involved in are appropriate for the people we work with.

We always shape our approaches and tools to our northern context. Our list of northern children's books, for example, helps people choose appropriate resources. However, the models that we have adapted for family literacy programs in the NWT are Euro-Canadian, designed to support English literacy, and to a large extent, school literacy. So we are using one literacy model and its accompanying practices with people who may have been socialized into another model, with different literacy practices.

We encourage the people we work with to adapt the models further or create their own, if possible in their own languages, to suit their particular situation. We know of several examples where people have done this successfully with both family and community literacy. We know of a mother who has developed grocery cards in her Aboriginal language to help her children learn the language when they go shopping: in other words, to learn words in context. One group of people researched and recorded their family trees. Several other groups have invited elders to be part of storytelling in early childhood programs, video-taping the sessions for future use. But we know this does not always happen, for a number of reasons.

For a start, many literacy workers, particularly younger people, may not speak their Aboriginal language, or may not speak it very well. They themselves may be learning their language. They may not have the skills or confidence to deliver a program in their own language.

Second, our programs are non-threatening, and easy-to-use. When people first deliver a literacy program, they may lack the confidence and skills to run a program for other people. They want a program they can follow easily—one that gives them all the tools they need. Planning a program in an Aboriginal language means people have to begin at the beginning and create their own materials. This involves different skills and usually takes more time. Often too, it means taking more risks, which people may not be prepared to do. Often, only older and/or more experienced literacy workers are willing to do that.

We encourage it—and people do it—but we know that translating programs from one culture to another is often not appropriate: the ideas and assumptions in them may present a very different view of the world. For example, the rhymes in *1-2-3 Rhyme with Me* are ones that we commonly find in English-speaking homes. Some, like *A smooth road, a bumpy road,* may apply across cultures, but others may be more culture-specific. If we look at the rhyme *This is the way the ladies ride,* we find it talks about a society with different social classes, about a rural society, and about a time when horses were the only way to travel around. It assumes that people know …

- How to ride a horse
- Certain things about the way ladies, gentlemen and farmers behave
- That different people have different kinds of horses
- That different people ride horses in different ways

That does not mean that people cannot learn the rhymes, translate them into their own language, and enjoy them—which we have seen happen—but they may not be very meaningful to them.

As a literacy organization, we struggle with the different literacies. We know that Aboriginal parents today want two things for their children: to retain their culture, and to do well in school. Yet we are aware from research that children whose home literacies do not reflect school literacies often do not do well in school[24]—a situation that many Aboriginal children in the NWT find themselves in. We see ourselves building a bridge between different types of literacies. We see

[24] Ibid.

ourselves helping parents support their children's learning at a young age—learning that will help them do better in school. School literacy is unlikely to change, at least in the short-term, so the kinds of interventions we are involved in will continue to be necessary. However, we want to develop a better understanding of the importance of home literacies and of the impact of matches and mismatches between the different literacies. Most importantly, though, we want to investigate ways that better support home literacies in an Aboriginal context, and identify strategies that acknowledge and reflect these multiple literacies.

4.0 Efforts to Support Aboriginal Literacy

Many organizations are involved in supporting Aboriginal languages and literacy. We have chosen to look at what two other literacy coalitions in Canada do, what the federal government and the GNWT do, and what language communities themselves have set as their priorities.

4.1 Models from other literacy coalitions

Literacy organizations in other parts of Canada reflect the importance of Aboriginal literacy to varying degrees. Saskatchewan and Nunavut, the two organizations we will look at, are in very different situations, and have taken different approaches to supporting Aboriginal literacy.

Saskatchewan

In Saskatchewan, in the 1996 Census, out of almost 1 million people, just over 110,000 were Aboriginal (11.4%). Although non-aboriginal people are by far the majority, the Aboriginal group is the fastest growing group in Saskatchewan. In recognition of this, the Saskatchewan Literacy Network has established a Provincial Aboriginal Literacy Steering Committee to guide a two-year Aboriginal Literacy Project. It believes that Aboriginal literacy services must "… recognize and affirm the unique cultures of Native Peoples and the connections between all of creation". Not all activities are in an Aboriginal language. The project goals are:

- To identify and share information about Aboriginal literacy programs and initiatives through the development of a directory of programs

- To identify strengths of current approaches, gaps and areas for improvement
- To organize and host an Aboriginal literacy gathering
- To develop a mechanism to provide support to Aboriginal literacy programs
- To create links between Aboriginal literacy programs and practitioners
- To establish connections with Aboriginal initiatives at the national level
- To develop a public awareness strategy to recognize, support and sustain the Aboriginal literacy initiative

Nunavut

Nunavut is the only territory in Canada where Aboriginal people are the majority. There, Inuit represent 85% of the population. In the 1996 Census, 72 percent of Nunavut residents said their mother tongue was Inuktitut, while 24 percent said it was English. In Canada, Cree is the only Aboriginal language with more speakers than Inuktitut.

The Nunavut Literacy Council endorses the vision for literacy that was developed at a literacy summit in Arviat:

> *All Nunavummiut have the right to participate fully and be included in their community. Literacy is much more than reading and writing, it also means being connected to your language and culture. Literacy involves everyone and is fundamental to the development of health and well-being. Literacy is fostering and nurturing understanding, knowledge and wisdom.*

The Council integrates Inuktitut into its daily work. It is currently undertaking an Inuktitut Family Literacy Project. One of the goals of this project is to help communities make the connection between the concepts of *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (Traditional Knowledge), *Ilippallianginnarniq* (Continuing Learning) and literacy. The Council is also developing an oral history manual that will include the benefits of using oral history and traditional knowledge as a tool to strengthen

Inuktitut. It will contain information on how to collect and publish oral histories. The Nunavut Literacy Council has an Aboriginal Language and Cultural Consultant on staff and Aboriginal members on its Board.

There are some major differences, however, between Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, when it comes to Aboriginal literacy:

- Inuktitut is used at home to a much greater degree than any of the NWT Aboriginal languages.
- Inuktitut is the language of instruction in schools in the early grades. This may mean fewer mismatches in terms of language and literacy practices during early literacy development.
- Nunavut has only one Aboriginal language, whereas the NWT has six, making the situation much more complex.

4.2 Funding for Aboriginal language activities in the NWT

Most funding for Aboriginal language work comes through the GNWT. In 2001-2002, through the Canada-NWT Cooperation Agreement for French and Aboriginal Languages in the NWT, the federal government provided approximately $2.3 million for Aboriginal languages, which the GNWT administered. About 50% of federal money funds Aboriginal language community initiatives. The remainder goes to teaching and learning centres, language instructor training, Aboriginal broadcasting, language research and language promotion.

In addition, the GNWT provides funding for Aboriginal language work, much of which supports school programming. In 2001-2002, the GNWT allocated about $7.1 million for Aboriginal language programs. It also funds the office of the Languages Commissioner[25]. The Assembly of First Nations administers funding from the federal government for Aboriginal languages, some of which is available through the Dene Nation. Other funding for language programming is available through programs like the Aboriginal Head Start program.

[25] Information on funding from Special Committee on the Review of the *Official Languages Act*. *Progress Report on the Review of the Official Languages Act*. Yellowknife: Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly, June 2002.

There are many different sources of funding, and it is not always clear to people how they can access funding for their projects.

> *It's been difficult to get money, confusing as to who has the money and who can get it. My suggestion was to distribute a list of all funding programs—it would be nice to see it under one committee—put all the money together and all the people sit on this committee.*
>
> Betty Vitrekwa[26]

4.3 GNWT initiatives

Over the years, the GNWT has introduced a number of initiatives to support Aboriginal languages. We highlight some that have had a significant impact on language and literacy work, as well as strategies that they are currently implementing.

The Official Languages Act of the NWT

In 1984, the GNWT first introduced the *Official Languages Act of the Northwest Territories*. This Act recognized the Aboriginal languages of the NWT as official languages. In 1990 changes to the Act gave equal status to all eight official languages (six Aboriginal languages, English and French). The NWT and Nunavut are the only places in Canada that recognize Aboriginal languages as official languages. The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages made recommendations that, in many ways, supported implementation of the *Official Languages Act.*

At present, a Special Committee of the Legislative Assembly is asking people for help to revise the *Official Languages Act*. As part of the process, the Committee invited the Literacy Council to attend its first languages assembly, along with members from the Aboriginal language communities, and to make a submission at the public hearing. The recent progress report includes

[26] In Special Committee on the Review of the *Official Languages Act*. *Progress Report on the Review of the Official Languages Act*. Yellowknife: Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly, June 2002.

a number of ideas for change that the second territorial languages assembly will discuss in October 2002. Many of the suggestions are designed to strengthen support for revitalizing the languages.

Standardizing the written languages

In the 1970s and 1980s, several different groups proposed using a standard set of characters and writing conventions to represent spoken Dene. They believed it would encourage widespread Aboriginal language literacy, as well as the development of written materials in the languages. Ultimately, people believed it would help preserve their languages. In 1987, following a recommendation from the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages, the GNWT began a process to standardize the writing system. The work on this project is complete, although not everyone has adopted the standardized system.

People—Our Focus for the Future: A Strategy to 2010

In 1994, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) consulted widely on language issues as it developed its fifteen-year strategic plan. Community members repeatedly said that Aboriginal language communities should be responsible for and have ownership over language activities. In *People—Our Focus for the Future: A Strategy to 2010,* the department said it would begin to transfer responsibility for languages to language communities. Along with this responsibility, it would also provide resources and support.

In 1996, it consulted again with people to develop a process for transferring the funding. As part of the process, language communities had to develop multi-year plans for their languages. At the same time, the language bureau was disbanded. While language communities are pleased to have control over their languages, adequate resources and support from the GNWT continue to be issues.

Towards Literacy: A Strategy Framework, 2001-2005

In its literacy strategy, *Towards Literacy: A Strategy Framework, 2001-2005,* the GNWT outlines a number of goals and objectives related to literacy throughout life. Although included in the

literacy strategy, most of the objectives for the early years, like early childhood and school, are supported and funded through other strategies or programs.

English is considered the basis for further education, but the strategy indicates, "While English skills are important, bilingual and "bi-literate" individuals in the aboriginal languages are not just an asset but also a necessity." The goal dedicated to literacy in Aboriginal languages is to increase awareness of the importance of literacy in the official languages of the NWT. The success of the actions will be measured through an increase in literacy levels in NWT official languages. Increasing literacy levels, though, will require a broad range of activities, which do not seem to be reflected in the actions in this part of the strategy.

Objectives	Actions
2.1.1 Promote the importance of literacy in the official languages of the NWT	Develop an awareness campaign Develop a Territorial Literacy Recognition Program Recognize oral language traditions and storytelling as a form of literacy Encourage the establishment of "literacy champions"
2.1.2 Support literacy development in all official languages of the NWT	Ensure educational programs reflect the culture, heritage and language of the community Consult with the aboriginal language communities to identify types of support needed to help revitalize, enhance and promote their language

From 2001 to 2005, out of a total $2.4 million a year, $300,000 is available through the strategy specifically for official languages literacy. Other portions of the literacy strategy funding, such as

that for seniors' or elders' literacy, may also be used to support Aboriginal language literacy activities.

The $300,000 is part of the $7.1 million the GNWT allocated for Aboriginal language work for 2001-2002 (see Page 18). During 2001-2002, the general public could access this 'pot of money'. However, ECE has indicated in discussions with us that it will be allocating the money in a different way this year: along with their other funding, each Aboriginal language community will receive $30,000 from this 'pot'. The department will use the rest to fund internal projects. Last year, we received some of this money—it was one of the few pots of money available to community organizations to support Aboriginal literacy. This year, however, there is some doubt about whether that money will be available to the general public, leaving organizations like ours with even fewer sources of funding for Aboriginal literacy work. Yet the strategy lists us as a partner in helping achieve these objectives.

A Long-Term Plan 2001-2006 Regarding the Role of Education, Culture and Employment in Aboriginal Languages Literacy in the Northwest Territories

To support the literacy strategy, Harnum & Associates developed a long-term plan to help the government define its role in supporting Aboriginal languages and literacy. It suggests that increasing literacy rates will depend on a wide variety of activities in the following areas, not just on literacy classes.

- Building and strengthening partnerships
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities of key partners
- Networking and developing communication links
- Promoting the Aboriginal languages, and literacy in these languages
- Undertaking research
- Consolidating resources
- Developing, sharing, adapting and publishing materials
- Training instructors

- Ensuring adequate computer support
- Developing fund-raising strategies and skills
- Developing and testing measurement tools
- Monitoring and evaluating results

The recommendations in this research report provide for a broad range of concrete activities. Implementing these recommendations would provide meaningful and much-needed support to Aboriginal literacy.

The Early Childhood Development Framework for Action

The Early Childhood Development Framework for Action, a joint ECE and Health and Social Services initiative, includes early learning and family literacy as key goals in its action plan. To help achieve these goals, the NWT Literacy Council received funding to develop and deliver family literacy training, and to oversee community family literacy projects. We have also developed family learning kits for the families of pre-schoolers to help children get ready for school. The kits include Aboriginal language books. This project helps families bridge the gap between different literacies. Initial feedback from those families that have received family learning kits has been extremely positive. Both short-term and longer-term evaluation tools are included as part of this process. These tools will be important in helping us determine the impact of such early literacy interventions.

As part of this early childhood initiative, ECE is doing research on language nests, or pre-school immersion programs. Their goal is to try to combine child and adult language acquisition, and their plan is to pilot-test some models in selected communities later this year. Aboriginal literacy, and how best to support it, will be a critical success factor for language nests.

Revitalizing, Enhancing, and Promoting Aboriginal Languages Strategies for Supporting Aboriginal Languages

Recently ECE released its Aboriginal language strategy, *Revitalizing, Enhancing, and Promoting Aboriginal Languages Strategies for Supporting Aboriginal Languages*. The four goals of this project include:

- Support Aboriginal language communities to develop and implement their language plans
- Promote the value of NWT official Aboriginal languages and their continued use in day-to-day activities
- Create a learning environment that supports Aboriginal language communities' efforts to revitalize Aboriginal languages
- Provide reasonable access to government programs and services in the Aboriginal languages

The strategy lists the NWT Literacy Council as a resource for Aboriginal language programs. When ECE launched the strategy, the Minister announced that $2 million was available to support implementation. We do not know, however, if this is new money, or money reallocated from other programs.

The GNWT's current strategies are linked, but the fact that each has its own document and funding tends to indicate a fractured, rather than a holistic, approach to language and literacy issues. Many people in communities are unaware of the initiatives. Others are confused about them, particularly about where to go for funding for language activities.

4.4 Aboriginal language communities' plans

As part of the process of transferring responsibility for languages from the GNWT, each Aboriginal language community had to develop a multi-year language plan to revitalize its language. The plans are specific to each language group. Literacy Council staff members helped

some groups with the planning process. Language communities are now implementing these plans.

As part of this project, we reviewed the plans to become familiar with the language groups' goals and priorities, and to try to find areas of overlap between their work and ours before we met with them. Each had a vision, goals and specific actions to support their language. We have highlighted the vision and the goals from each plan.

Language community	Key elements of plan
Chipewyan	**Vision**: A fully bilingual homeland, with the Chipewyan language and culture as the primary language of the region **Goals:** • Preserve the structure and terminology of the language, along with the traditional stories and teachings • Ensure that younger generations understand and learn the skills, knowledge, ceremonies, values and beliefs embedded in the language • Increase the numbers of fluent speakers of the language, particularly those using the language as a first language at home • Provide a purpose for using the language, and create laws and policies to make the language the dominant language in the region
Cree	**Vision**: Cree people will have the ongoing opportunity to learn and speak their language at home, in the community, and in the school system. Many Cree cultural activities will take place in the community and on the land. The Cree language will be the main language used to practice and express Cree culture. **Goals:** • Encourage people to make a personal commitment to learn, teach and speak the language at home, at school, at work, and in the community. Encourage organizations to support Cree language through funding, participating in language planning, providing assistance with Cree activities • Encourage organizations to commit resources, to take part in planning activities, and to help with Cree language and cultural activities • Develop family-based instruction in the appropriate cultural context • Create stronger links with the schools • Develop more Bush Cree materials, particularly videos of elders speaking the language • Increase public awareness about loss of language and pride in Cree language

Dogrib	**Vision:** To stabilize, develop and revitalize the Dogrib language **Goals:** • Increase public knowledge and awareness of the importance and value of using the Dogrib language • Promote the use of the Dogrib language in homes, in public places, at work, and throughout the communities • Collect and preserve cultural and linguistic materials through research, to support language and cultural programs in the schools, health centres and other organizations • Develop and implement language and cultural programs at the primary, secondary, post-secondary and adult education levels of education, including materials and learning resources • Train members of the community to be knowledgeable about and literate in the Dogrib language and information technology, so that they can support language and cultural work in all the communities • Provide interpretation and translation services to help transmit knowledge and understanding between generations and across cultural groups
Gwich'in	**Vision**: A revitalized language in the communities of the Mackenzie Delta that will maintain the link between the past and the present, maintain identity and restore a sense of pride and self-worth **Goals:** • Establish a language office to lead the revitalization effort • Research and establish policies to support language revitalization efforts • Develop a system to test and certify translator/ interpreter services • Conduct research on priority areas • Combine language programming and funding, including that for schools, with a view to developing a comprehensive program for Gwich'in language instruction • Develop community-based language programs • Promote the Gwich'in language through various media
North Slavey	**Vision**: Land claim and self-government agreements will give Dene people in the Sahtu region the authority and resources to maintain and strengthen their traditional language and culture. The Dene language will be spoken by all ages and will be the predominant language at home, at school, in government, for business, and in all social activities. The language, skills, traditions, ceremonies, beliefs, stories, and traditional lifestyle of the Dene will be passed on to future generations throughout the Sahtu region **Goals:** • Preserve the structure and terminology of the language, along with the traditional stories and teachings • Ensure that younger generations understand and learn the skills, knowledge,

	ceremonies, values and beliefs embedded in the language • Increase the numbers of fluent speakers of the language, particularly those using the language as a first language at home • Provide a purpose for using the language, and create laws and policies to make the language the dominant language in the region The activities associated with these goals will vary from community to community
South Slavey	**Vision**: The Dene language of the Deh Cho will be maintained in an integral Dene culture. The Elders of the Deh Cho will control the planning and work of preserving and developing the Dene language of the Deh Cho through traditional community consultation, in the context of a healthy lifestyle **Goals:** • Establish a language and cultural centre • Conduct language workshops in every Deh Cho community • Promote the importance of language use • Ensure healing is a part of preserving and developing the language • Establish language nests in every community • Provide incentives for young people to learn and use the language • Establish Dene language media • Design and create modern Dene language learning systems • Enhance the Dene language in the workplace
Inuvialuit	**Vision**: Create the climate to begin to revitalize Inuvialuktun **Goals:** • Encourage key organizations to provide leadership through policies that support the language • Request the federal and territorial governments to develop flexible funding criteria to support flexible approaches to language learning • Work with the Beaufort-Delta DEC, and IRC to support language programming in schools through improved staff development and support and the development of curriculum and learning materials • Promote use of the language • Strengthen existing language programs, like pre-school programs • Develop new initiatives that focus on young children, the family, youth and adults • Build capacity in the communities through training, funding and curriculum development

Since the health of the language determines people's priorities for their language, each plan has a different focus, but there are some commonalities. All have a desire to see their language

revitalized—to see it being used again more strongly than at present. Some groups want their language to be the primary language in their region. Oral traditions continue to have a strong focus. In some plans, we see a continuum of language and literacy development, from oral traditions through to writing in the Aboriginal language. Many activities in the plans are ones in which we have a common interest.

PART III CONSULTING LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES

5.0 Consulting Language Communities

Aboriginal language communities are responsible for Aboriginal language development and must have full ownership and control of their cultural and language heritage. As literacy advocates, we believe we can play an important role in supporting them in their work. To do this, though, we need to understand 'literacy' in the NWT Aboriginal context to make our goals consistent with those of Aboriginal language communities. We also need to understand the processes and tools that can support literacy development in that context. And, perhaps, most importantly, we need the Aboriginal language communities to help us define our role as possible partners in Aboriginal literacy work. Consulting the different Aboriginal language communities was therefore an important part of this project.

5.1 The consultation process

Before meeting with representatives of the language communities, we developed a set of questions to guide the discussions. We then pilot-tested these questions with one of the language coordinators, and revised them based on her suggestions (see Appendix B). The questions were meant to be a guide only—we did not follow them rigidly. We then travelled to six of the eight regions to meet with different people involved in language work, including the language coordinators for the language communities. In two of the regions, the language coordinators had recently resigned, and no one was available to meet with us within our timeframe.

We also had the opportunity to meet language coordinators and other community language workers, including elders, at a number of language meetings in Yellowknife. As well, the Deninu Kue Working Group made a presentation to a Literacy Council Board Meeting. Those occasions let us discuss matters with them more informally.

Language communities welcomed the Literacy Council's initiative to examine its role in supporting Aboriginal literacy. In fact, one person said, 'I am delighted that the Literacy Council is interested in being a partner in supporting Aboriginal literacy'. While people commented on our role, they tended to talk more about specific activities that the council might be (more) involved in. In fact, there was no shortage of ideas.

As we met with the various language communities, the answers to our questions inevitably sorted themselves around a number of language issues. We have used these issues as the organizers for this section of the report.

5.2 Language Issues

Issue 1: Defining and understanding literacy

Literacy is defined in many different ways. Often it has a narrow focus on reading and writing, with an emphasis on English, but literacy is much broader than that. The NWT Literacy Strategy uses this definition:

> *… an individual's ability to listen, speak, read, write, view, represent, compute and solve problems in one or more of the NWT official languages at levels of proficiency necessary to function in the family, in the community and on the job.*

In the Literacy Council, we tend to use this definition:

> *Literacy is the ability to read, write, calculate, speak and understand and communicate in other forms of language according to need. It is a continuum of these skills necessary for everyday life in the home, at work, in education and in the community.*

We define 'family literacy' as:

> *…the way parents, children and other family members use literacy at home and in their community. Family literacy occurs naturally during the routines of daily living.*

As we expected, people in the language communities told us repeatedly that there was no Aboriginal word for 'literacy'. To them, the term 'literacy' suggests reading and writing in English. When we asked what 'family literacy' meant, they created a picture of a family sitting around reading—again in English. So even though our definition of family literacy does not use the word 'reading' or 'English', Aboriginal people equate family literacy with 'reading'. In the case of both 'literacy' and 'family literacy', they see English as the medium of communication.

Not surprisingly, based on what we had learned from our preliminary research, no one was prepared to define 'Aboriginal literacy'. However, people readily discussed, and agreed on, certain aspects of it:

- 'Aboriginal literacy' creates a picture of language in context. When you learn words, you learn them in an environment appropriate to these words. So, for example, when you learn language associated with the land, you learn it out on the land.
- It represents relationships or connections—with the environment, with ancestors, with family and community, with things spiritual.
- It is associated with cultural 'do's and don'ts'—with values and beliefs and traditional knowledge.

- It is holistic and encompasses mental, physical, spiritual and emotional elements.
- It teaches concepts.
- Its emphasis is on oral and visual skills.
- It needs materials relevant to Aboriginal culture—in the same way English literacy uses materials relevant to English speakers.

A Dene elder helped us understand where people had come from in terms of literacy and explained some of the changes that she has seen. She told us that in the old days, people who read books were considered lazy, because there was so much work to be done just to survive. Reading was not seen as work. 'Literacy' then included understanding the weather, reading the land, looking for animal tracks, understanding animal behaviour, showing respect for animals, telling children orally about their ancestors, teaching children values through legends, and so on. In other words, when parents taught their children literacy, they were teaching them skills they needed to survive.

She suggested that today's literacies still involve survival skills. However, the survival skills and the literacies associated with them have changed. For Aboriginal people today, they include traditional skills, wherever possible taught in the Aboriginal language, to help people retain their identity and their connection with their culture, but now they also have to include reading and writing in English. She said that parents must understand they need to help their children develop both sets of skills.

Possible role for the Literacy Council

People saw a definite role for us in researching and sharing information on the broader meaning of 'literacy'. They were interested in the idea of multiple literacies, and on different literacy models and practices. They wanted Aboriginal literacy to be seen as a legitimate and valued part of those literacies.

Some of the specific activities that people suggested we might become involved in included:

- Help people understand the full meaning and the value of different literacies
- Research, collect, document and share information on different literacy models and practices

Issue 2: Roles and responsibilities, coordination and collaboration

Many people are involved in Aboriginal language and literacy development: Aboriginal language communities, education councils and authorities, Teaching and Learning Centres, NWT Literacy Council, cultural institutes, Aboriginal Head Start programs, the GNWT, the federal government, the office of the Languages Commissioner, Aurora College, and so on. People told us that coordination among all these groups is a challenge. It is not uncommon for one group to duplicate what another is doing. For example, ECE is doing research on language nests, and the office of the Languages Commissioner is also studying the topic. At the time when we were meeting with the language communities, the Literacy Council, ECE and the Special Committee on the Review of the *Official Languages Act* were all consulting with the language communities. While each had a slightly different focus, nevertheless we were consulting with the same people, who were telling us all very similar things.

Coordination is necessary for language programming to be comprehensive. However, it is not just a problem for groups from outside the community. It also seems to be a problem between some language communities and other community groups that work on language, like schools. An important part of language planning is school programming, but the school is outside the control of the language community. Some language groups have combined, or are trying to combine, the work of the Teaching and Learning Centre and the language community—although sometimes with some tension.

Generally, people believe there is too much duplication and overlap of programs and services, and of roles and responsibilities. As a result, people are confused and do not know who does what. The Literacy Council is a good example. When we asked people if they knew what we did, for the

most part, the answer was 'No'. Some people, including those whom we would expect to know, think we are a government body. Some think we are the group that provides funding for literacy programs. Others think we are responsible for the Community Literacy Fund, which ECE regional offices administer. People in communities who have had some contact with the Literacy Council in the past tended to have a better idea of what we did. We discovered that the office of the Languages Commissioner is preparing a list of the different organizations, and their roles and responsibilities to try to clarify the issue.

The language communities are responsible for managing their own language revitalization. If Aboriginal languages are to survive, roles and responsibilities need to be clear. As well, agencies need to collaborate more with the language communities in the future to help them meet the challenge.

Possible role for the Literacy Council

People saw that we might have a role in advocating for greater coordination to help them deal with this issue. But they also had specific suggestions for our organization:

- Increase coordination between the Literacy Council and language communities by promoting and reinforcing what the language community is doing.
- Establish a Literacy Council Advisory Committee on Aboriginal literacy and activities. Its members should have some knowledge of the work of the language communities.
- Increase the visibility of regional board members as a way of helping communities understand the work of the Literacy Council.

Language use

Statistical information on Aboriginal language use is limited. Several language communities have conducted their own surveys to try to get a more accurate picture of this. Even without good data, however, people know that language use is shifting from mother tongue to English in the home, and they are concerned about it. One person said that families must be encouraged to speak their language—not scolded because they do not use it. Families have to understand that it is important

for them to speak to their children, and why—that it is important for children to hear the sounds of the language. This is particularly true in languages with oral traditions. In English literacy, we emphasize the importance of 'environmental print'—print that is found around us every day, like road signs. One person suggested that for Aboriginal language literacy, we have to emphasize the importance of 'environmental sound'.

There is a lot of misunderstanding around how children learn a language. We should not assume that children from different cultures learn language and literacy in identical ways. As we have seen, literacy is embedded in socio-cultural contexts. Members of a group define 'literacy' largely by the ways they use it. There is much work to do to find out how Aboriginal children learn their language and are socialized into literacy. One of the priorities of the Dogrib language community is to establish directions for research, and one area of research they are interested in is how children learn Dogrib.

People may also misunderstand the effects of learning another language. For example, many parents think that if children learn their Aboriginal language as their first language, then it will be more difficult to learn English as a second language. A number of research studies have shown this is not true. In fact, there are benefits from speaking more than one language. Language communities want support in helping people understand this.

A number of groups thought language nests could be a positive approach to children's language development, but emphasized that the programs must be based on how children learn language in their Aboriginal context. A language nest based on an English model of language and literacy development would likely not be effective in helping children acquire an Aboriginal language. They also suggested that, given the language use situation in the NWT, language nests must focus on families, so that adults also acquire the language and can reinforce it at home. The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation funds one language position in each of its child development centres. All the language teachers visited immersion programs in southern Canada to see how they worked elsewhere, and to reinforce the idea of using the language at all times.

To be used, the language needs to be seen as useful in people's everyday lives. To promote language use, some groups felt the GNWT needed to provide more materials in Aboriginal languages. Materials written in plain language would make them easier to translate, and easier to understand in English.

Possible role for the Literacy Council

People felt the Literacy Council should be able to help dispel myths about language learning, and the benefits that come from knowing more than one language. They also felt that we should be able to do more to promote the use of Aboriginal languages and literacy. Some groups also saw the possibility of partnering with us to research how children learn their language and develop literacy in that specific language. They also endorsed our work in plain language, seeing it as a means to more easily provide translations of materials.

Some of the specific activities that people suggested we might become involved in included:

- Work with communities to research how children learn their Aboriginal language
- Provide workshops for parents on how children learn language and on how to support their children's language learning and literacy development
- Promote the benefits of learning more than one language ('the richness of opportunity')
- Promote literacy in all languages, emphasizing the importance and value of oral traditions
- Promote the use of Aboriginal languages across the NWT
- Promote various forms of literacy, such as a playwriting contest for CKLB, so that people see different types of literacy in our work
- Establish an NWT story-telling festival, including drum dancing, fiddling and singing
- Emphasize the importance of community radio for storytelling
- Use the Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) to promote the language
- Advocate for the need for data on Aboriginal language literacy
- Advocate for the use of plain language in government publications

Language expertise and language teaching approaches

The Aboriginal language expertise in a community often rests with the elders. We were told this has a number of possible implications. First, older people may be expert in the language, but may not know how to teach the language to very young children. For example, an elder complained that she would teach her grandson a word in her language, but he would soon forget it, so she stopped teaching him. Second, many older language instructors are ready to retire, but younger people do not necessarily have the same level of language skills. This means they first need to learn the language, before they can be trained in teaching approaches. And thirdly, young Aboriginal people do not like to make mistakes. They may be reluctant to speak the language in front of an elder for fear of making a mistake.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment and Aurora College have the expertise and the resources for teacher/ instructor education. The College currently runs an Aboriginal language instructor program, along with the Teacher Education Programs. People in Inuvik mentioned the Aboriginal language literacy program at Aurora Campus as a good example of the kinds of programs that are needed.

Some people, however, commented on the fact that the approaches used to teach Aboriginal languages are different from those used for English. Generally, the teaching of English uses a more linear approach. One person suggested that people who teach Aboriginal languages have become too English in their thinking. If teaching and learning are to be effective, appropriate teaching approaches should be used. A possible research project would be to investigate best practices for teaching Aboriginal literacy.

Possible role for the Literacy Council

People felt that the Literacy Council had considerable experience in developing and delivering training courses in literacy. Some saw opportunities for the Aboriginal language community, the College and the Literacy Council to work together on a model for Aboriginal literacy courses. As

well, some language groups thought the Literacy Council could assist them in lobbying for more resources to support such courses.

Some of the specific activities that people suggested we might become involved in included:

- Examine and share information on best practices for teaching Aboriginal literacy
- Work with other organizations to develop a course outline for Aboriginal literacy that can be used as a model for all languages
- Develop and deliver workshops/ training institutes for Aboriginal literacy

Resource materials

Developing resources is an on-going challenge for all language communities. Many people commented on how many English language resources are available, but how few in Aboriginal languages. Others commented that Aboriginal language resources were generally poorer quality than English resources. All groups said we need good quality materials in Aboriginal languages that engage children. In other words, Aboriginal language resources should be equal in quality to the attractive children's books available in English.

Several noted the lack of a language curriculum in schools: Dene Kede and Inuuqatigiit are cultural curricula, and most people were unaware of the new Western Consortium Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs. This means there is no basis for organized resource development for school programs.

Several groups also commented on the lack of environmental print in Aboriginal languages in communities. Much of the print is in English. Some groups have undertaken projects to expand the amount of Aboriginal language print people encounter in their daily lives. For example, a number of communities have put up street signs in the local language, or developed resources using traditional names. Although print material is limited, people felt this was a way of raising its profile, and capturing traditional knowledge, in communities.

Improving our support for Aboriginal literacy in the NWT

There are a number of reasons for the lack of materials in Aboriginal languages:

- It takes a long time to develop materials. For example, several groups were working on a dictionary that involved a lot of detailed and time-consuming work.
- The groups do not necessarily have people with the skills to develop resource materials.
- There are very few dollars available to publish materials. Low print runs are much more expensive than large print runs.
- There is no language curriculum, so nothing to guide resource development. Someone commented that this would not be acceptable for English or French.
- Aboriginal languages have an oral tradition. This means it is important for children to hear the sound of the languages. People suggested a multi-media approach to materials development: materials would include English and the Aboriginal language, plus a CD or tape.
- Most Aboriginal language communities in the NWT have a number of dialects. For example, Inuvialuktun includes Siglit, Inuinnaqtun and Ummarmiut. This creates an increased workload when it comes to producing resources.

As part of this project, we worked with language communities to identify children's books in Aboriginal languages, so that we could add them to our northern booklist. However, in doing this, we experienced first-hand some of the difficulties.

Local dialects are important to people because of the relationships they reflect. In some language communities, resources are published in each of the dialects, which is expensive; in others the groups have agreed to go with one dialect, and adapt them as necessary. After consulting with speakers of the language, one organization developed a series of children's books in cooperation with other groups. They could not let us use them, though, because they still had to resolve difficulties over the correct way to write or spell words. Also when we were trying to identify Aboriginal language books, we received a selection of books from one region. Some had white stick-on labels on them. When we ordered the books, we said we did not want those with labels.

We found out later that the labels were used to replace the dialect of one community with that of another. In fact, we needed the ones with the labels. Local dialects add to the challenge for groups like us, working on Aboriginal literacy.

We also experienced the high cost of publishing. There were no NWT resources for children in Bush Cree, so we published a 20-page full-colour number book that the Nihkanis Centre Aboriginal Head Start Program in Fort Smith developed. It cost over $5000 for 200 copies. The Head Start program has a number of other books in the same series, but the costs of publishing will make it difficult for them to publish them all, despite the fact they are valuable resources.

Possible role for the Literacy Council

People could see that the Literacy Council was already heavily involved in resource development and publication. In fact, we were already working with two groups to produce materials in Aboriginal languages. They thought we could advocate about the need to have materials in Aboriginal languages, and they also saw a role for us in helping people get materials published..

Several groups emphasized the need for a multi-media approach to resource production, because of the importance of children hearing the sound of the language. And some of those who were familiar with the writing workshops that we had previously developed and delivered with Aboriginal people said they were extremely beneficial and should be repeated. This would help reinforce the standardized writing system, as well as provide more resources and foster literacy development.

Some of the specific activities that people suggested we might become involved in included:

- Support standardizing the language as a way to ensure an endangered language will continue, by helping people understand general literacy issues
- Hold writing workshops in Aboriginal languages
- Encourage the use of environmental print in Aboriginal languages in communities

- Continue to hold our annual writing contest, but only in Aboriginal languages
- Experiment with interactive materials for children
- Plan and deliver resource development workshops, that include:
    - language tools, such as grocery shopping cards, with English on one side and the Aboriginal language on the other, that people can take with them so that the language can be learned in context. They emphasized that we should not use blank cards, since many people cannot write the language.
    - multi-media resources (computer, CD, audio, print, video, photos, etc.)
- Bring together community people, schools, adult education programs to collect and share Aboriginal literacy ideas
- Coordinate terminology workshops
- Provide support for publishing, such as publishing workshops, how to access funding, help to manage projects, and encourage more joint efforts around publishing to reduce costs
- Advocate for publishing funding to increase the numbers of Aboriginal language resources
- Develop a collection of jokes (several people commented on how much Aboriginal people enjoy jokes)
- Advocate for a clearing house of Aboriginal language materials
- Advocate for quality standards for Aboriginal language materials

Language funding

Funding is a major issue when it comes to language development for several reasons:

- Language communities believe that the funding they receive is inadequate to revitalize their language. The government allocates funding based on the size of the language community—not on its health. One question that people raised over and over was "How much money does the government spend on English language and literacy?"
- Funding is not available for critical positions, such as a curriculum specialist or a linguist; nor is funding identified specifically for resource materials

- Government funding is divided into many different "pots": Community Literacy Projects, Aboriginal Literacy, seniors' literacy, literacy for people with disabilities, the funding for Aboriginal language communities, and so on. The Dene Nation also has language funding. It is very difficult for communities to know who funds what. At the same time, funding guidelines tend to be inflexible, and may restrict the use of the money to one group of people—seniors, for example.
- Language communities need multi-year funding for continuity and consistency in projects and staff.

Possible role for the Literacy Council

People saw a definite role for the Literacy Council in the area of funding, both as an advocate for improved and more coordinated funding, and as an organization that could provide assistance to people in accessing funding.

Some of the specific activities that people suggested we might become involved in included:

- Develop a book of funding sources, similar to the one the first Languages Commissioner prepared—one that is much more extensive than our current list
- Continue to offer proposal-writing workshops, but extend them. People felt one day was not enough to give people the skills they need. They also wanted sample proposals specifically for Aboriginal language projects
- Provide one-on-one hands-on-assistance to people to write proposals

None of the issues that people discussed is new, but they are important to people. They are all areas where people feel they need some kind of support.

People appreciate the work we have already done to support Aboriginal literacy. We received overwhelming support to continue to be involved in this work, and perhaps to play a larger role, with one caution: we cannot sit in Yellowknife and make decisions on our own about Aboriginal

literacy issues and work. People want us involved, but want to work with us and be part of the decision-making processes.

PART IV A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

6.0 Developing a Framework for Supporting Aboriginal Literacy

Before we can redefine our role, we need to separate the tasks into those we already do, that we can continue or enhance, and those that require a longer-term approach and more fundamental change. We also need to look at the capacity of our organization, which we can do by examining our strengths and challenges.

6.1 Our strengths and challenges

We have a number of strengths we bring to our work.

a. Our commitment to literacy—Since 1989, the NWT Literacy Council has supported literacy development throughout the north.

- We have been strong advocates for literacy.
- We have been involved in many literacy initiatives.
- We were invited to participate in the review of the *Official Languages Act* because of our commitment to languages and literacy.

b. Our expertise and experience—We have worked in the area of literacy, both in training and in developing resources for a number of years. As well, all our program staff have worked as educators in the school or adult education system, or both. Several staff have worked in ECE as curriculum and policy developers for school and adult literacy programs. One person speaks an Aboriginal language and is knowledgeable about Aboriginal literacy. Collectively, we have a wealth of expertise and experience in language and literacy.

c. **Our long-term commitment to the NWT and our understanding of language issues here—**All our staff are long-time northerners. Four of us have lived in the north for between 8 and 29 years, and the other was born here and speaks an Aboriginal language. We have extensive experience of language issues, of life in small communities and of the importance of community development and ownership. We are all committed to the north and its people. That commitment to meeting the needs of northerners is making us ask questions about how we can do a better job of supporting Aboriginal literacy.

d. **Our credibility in communities—**As a community-based organization, people respect our efforts to build skills within the community. Many communities have benefited from our work. Altogether we have trained more than 65 people in family literacy and 20 communities have run, or are running, a number of family literacy programs—some in Aboriginal languages.

At the same time, however, we face a number of challenges that might limit our participation.

a. **Our mandate—**Language communities suggested a range of activities that we might be involved in, but not all are within our mandate. Some are the responsibility of language communities' and others are a government responsibility. This does not mean that we cannot partner with another organization, however.

   We have chosen to focus on areas that build community capacity, believing that giving people skills to do something for themselves is more effective than doing things for people. We would like to retain that focus.

b. **Our funding—**Our financial resources are severely limited. All our funding is project-based: this means we have no core funding for activities outside individual projects. We must be careful not to raise expectations—in many ways, our funding base is even more tenuous than that of the language communities. As well, as we have noted before, funding guidelines may

restrict what we can do with the money. So for example, if we want to partner with groups on a research project, both groups need access to suitable funding. Despite our funding limitations, however, we have successfully supported many literacy initiatives.

c. **Our limited human resources—**Another aspect of any new, or changing, role we might assume is the capacity of our own organization. We are a small non-profit organization with an Executive Director, four program staff and an administrative assistant—and limited capacity. We have, however, a broad range of expertise in family literacy, language development, resource development, research, training, advocacy and public awareness.

6.2 A framework for change

In the short-term, some of our work will not change. For example, our work with early literacy interventions such as the family literacy training and the family learning kits will continue, because it is still necessary to support children's learning to help them within the school setting. Other aspects of our role and the activities that people have suggested are an enhancement of what we do now, perhaps with a broader focus. For example, we already deliver proposal-writing workshops that we can easily enhance to respond to the needs people identified. We already produce a list of funding sources: we can easily make the list more comprehensive. When we are planning, we need to separate out those activities from ones that require more fundamental change, like the way we make decisions related to Aboriginal literacy.

All our current projects respond to identified needs, but what we do in the projects and how we do them, we largely decide internally by ourselves. Working with Aboriginal language groups will mean a different way of making decisions. Sometimes they will initiate a project that we will play a supportive role in. At other times, we might initiate the project, but members of the language communities will be involved in setting priorities and in making decisions about what to do and how to do it. For us, this means finding an appropriate mechanism for that to happen.

Here are some things that we need to do to position ourselves to make longer-term changes.

	A framework for change
Decision-making structures	• Examine how we currently make decisions to find a mechanism that would include members of Aboriginal language communities in decision-making for Aboriginal literacy projects. (For example, we may have to establish a new structure that allows for an Aboriginal Literacy Advisory Committee or working group.) • Develop a vision and long-term plan for work in Aboriginal literacy. • Identify projects in Aboriginal literacy that build capacity at the family/ community level.
Research	• Establish a research agenda that includes research on multiple literacies to help us better understand what they are, the impact on learning, how they are related, the impact of mismatches between different kinds of literacies, and strategies for dealing with multiple literacies. • Establish a list of possible pilot-projects or joint projects that might evolve from our research, like identifying and sharing information on best practices for teaching Aboriginal literacy. • Begin to develop partnerships with academic institutions that would support research we might undertake. • Develop a definition of 'literacy' that is inclusive, that recognizes and values different literacies in the NWT.
Training	• Examine our approach to training to reflect our findings on different literacies. • Identify additional training we might develop and deliver.
Resource development	• Experiment with forms of media, other than print, particularly multimedia and interactive forms of media, to produce resources that support oral literacy, multiple literacies, and multiple languages, that we can then share with other people. • Explore ways to build capacity in publishing.
Promotion & public awareness	• Identify ways to actively promote the use of Aboriginal languages. • Model the use of Aboriginal languages in our promotional material to show that we value Aboriginal literacies. (This requires identifying sources of additional funding to support the development of materials in Aboriginal languages.)
Advocacy	• Identify and priorize advocacy issues specific to Aboriginal literacy, and continue our work in this area.

7.0 Conclusion

In fall 2002, the Literacy Council will begin a strategic planning process that will guide us through the next five years. The knowledge we have gained through this project will inform our planning, both in the short- and the long-term.

Improving our support for Aboriginal literacy in the NWT

Our research and consultations were a preliminary step in beginning to build better partnerships with Aboriginal language communities. We are committed to acting on their suggestions wherever possible to improve our support for Aboriginal languages and literacy. We thank them for their overwhelming support for our work, and their generosity in sharing their ideas with us.

Appendix A

Mother Tongue and Home Language, by Age[27], Northwest Territories, Census Years 1996

		0-9 years	10-19 years	20-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50-59 years	60 years and over
Total	64, 125	14, 850	11,450	10,935	11,675	8,110	4,065	3,030
English								
Mother Tongue	35,835	8,795	6,410	6,175	7,125	4,720	1,850	760
Home Language	43,365	9,550	7,170	7,450	8,985	6,220	2,640	1,350
% Home/Mother	121.0	108.6	111.9	120.6	126.1	131.8	142,7	177.6
French								
Mother Tongue	1,355	95	85	180	420	315	165	95
Home Language	550	80	60	70	150	105	50	40
% Home/Mother	40.6	84.2	70.6	38.9	35.7	33.3	30.3	42.1
Inuktitut								
Mother Tongue	18,495	4,970	3,900	3,300	2,535	1,640	1,125	1,020
Home Language	4,900	4,335	3,325	2,520	1,735	1,175	925	890
% Home/Mother	80.6	87.2	85.3	76.4	68.4	71.6	82.2	87.3
South Slave								
Mother Tongue	2, 085	215	260	340	370	350	220	320
Home Language	1, 195	145	175	185	145	135	140	270
% Home/Mother	57.3	67.4	67.3	54.4	39.2	38.6	63.6	84.4
Dogrib								
Mother Tongue	2,005	305	400	415	340	215	120	215
Home Language	1,355	230	275	265	175	105	100	210
% Home/Mother	67.6	75.4	68.8	63.9	51.5	48.8	83.3	97.7
Chipewyan								
Mother Tongue	515	25	40	60	90	90	65	150
Home Language	210	10	30	30	20	10	30	75
% Home/Mother	40.8	40.0	75.0	50.0	22.2	11.1	46.2	50.0
North Slave								
(Hare)	255	20	25	25	50	45	35	55
Mother Tongue	120	20	20	10	-	20	10	40
Home Language	47.1	100.0	80.0	40.0	-	44.4	28.6	72.7
% Home/Mother								
Gwich'in								
Mother Tongue	245	10	10	10	20	35	65	115
Home Language	40	-	-	20	-	-	-	30
% Home/Mother	16.3	-	-	200.0	-	-	-	26.1
Cree								
Mother Tongue	180	10	10	10	35	45	35	45
Home Language	30	-	-	-	-	-	-	10
% Home/Mother	16.7	-	-	-	-	-	-	22.2

[27] 1) Total and percentages are calculated for single responses only. As a result percentages for Home Language/ Mother Tongue may not equal those reported in Table 1.
2) T be included in the tables, a mother tongue has to be reported for at least 100 persons resident in the NWT at the time of the 1996 Census.
Source: NWT Bureau of Statistics

Appendix B

Supporting Aboriginal Literacy in the NWT

Consultation Questions

1. What do you think the NWT Literacy Council does? Are you aware of all the services we offer?

2. What are your priorities for your language? What areas are you currently working on? Do you use the standardized Dene orthography in written materials?

3. Is there any common ground between the work of the NWT Literacy Council and your work?

4. What do the words 'literacy' and 'family literacy' mean to you from an Aboriginal perspective? What is Aboriginal literacy?

5. What are some of the traditional ways in which Aboriginal literacy was taught?

6. What different forms of oral literacy were used/ could be used in promoting Aboriginal literacy?

7. How can oral literacy approaches and written literacy co-exist to support each other?

8. What do you have in place to support literacy development eg. skills development, training, tools? What more do you need to help you?

9. Do you see a role for the Literacy Council in promoting the use of Aboriginal languages/ Aboriginal literacy? What would it be? What might the key messages be in promoting the use of Aboriginal languages?

10. What about in training? (proposal writing/ teaching methodologies ...)

11. What about in resource development?

12. What about in research?

13. Are there any other areas where the Literacy Council might be able to support you?

Appendix C

Contacts

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Language Coordinators' Meetings

October, 2001	Special Committee on the Review of the *Official Languages Act* Assembly
October, 2001	Languages Commissioner's Advisory Board Meeting
February, 2002	ECE Language Coordinators' Meetings

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